One of the most difficult parts of any training program is replicating the pressure of competition. In order to create the feel of being in an actual game, athletes in several other sports participate in scrimmages and practice games. For shooters, it’s not always that easy to organize a scrimmage, especially for athletes training on their own, with limited time or as members of a small team.

One training technique that the University of Arkansas Fort Smith air rifle club team finds very useful in recreating match pressure is the guts match. Our team shoots several guts matches every week, and we have come up with some creative variations to enhance the competitive pressure and help shooters focus on specific parts of their game. Because we compete in 10 meter precision air, we shoot almost exclusively in standing, but the guts match works in any position with rifle or pistol.

The basic guts match is very simple. The shooters come to the line and prepare to compete. After being given the start command, they get 75 seconds to fire one shot. Once all shooters have fired, or the 75 seconds have elapsed, the line is called cold, all shots are scored and the shooter with the lowest score is eliminated from the match. This process repeats until only the winning shooter remains.

To use a cross-sports metaphor, I like to compare guts matches to make-it-take-it basketball, in which the team that scores the bucket gets the ball again instead of going back on defense. To raise the stakes, you can exempt the winning shooter from helping to sweep up the range or put up equipment for that day. Like the Navy SEALs say, it pays to be a winner.

For those shooters lucky enough to have electronic targets, scoring a guts match is simple and automatic. While our team doesn’t yet have electronic targets, we call the firing line cold, and walk forward to score the paper targets after each round is complete.

With beginning or intermediate level shooters, the scoring is very straightforward. There might not be many shooters consistently hitting tens, so there will probably be a broad range of scores making for clear winners and losers.

For higher level shooting athletes, the scoring can be refined to count inner tens or Xs, so a 10.8 would beat a 10.7, which would really ratchet up the pressure to perform.

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By Roy Hill, University of Arkansas Fort Smith Rifle Coach

COACH KNOWS BEST
TRAINING TO WIN

IT TAKES GUTS

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Using paper targets with four to six shooters on the line, we find that most of our guts matches are over within 10 minutes, with only a few guts matches lasting much longer. We can shoot several guts matches within the span of an hour, increasing the team’s exposure to match pressures. We also use guts matches as part of periodization training, increasing their frequency to work on mental focus and performing under match pressure.

Most of our matches through the year are on weekends, with Friday usually being a travel day. On Thursdays of match weeks, and on Fridays of non-match weeks, we like to shoot low-round count exercises, but try to increase the mental intensity, which makes guts matches a perfect training method for these times.

Shooting a guts match can help shooters in many different ways. First, it is a one-shot match which forces the shooters to intensely focus on their shot processes and component parts—sight picture, hold control, breath control, trigger control and follow through. Shooters who do not focus on their shot processes or shooting fundamentals will find themselves quickly eliminated from the match. Many times I’ve seen an unfocused shooter really improve his or her focus after being eliminated early from guts matches two or three times in a row.

It also helps shooters to understand what I mean when I ask them, plead with them, beg them, cajole them to approach an entire match as firing only one shot, and repeating that one shot over and over throughout the match. A guts match is, literally, a one-shot match.

I’ve had several shooters say to me, “Oh, this is what you mean about that one-shot stuff;” after competing in a few guts matches. In a guts match, shooters cannot afford to spend too much time lamenting a bad shot or celebrating a good shot. That shot is over, and the only shot that exists, the next shot, begins as soon as the scores are announced and the 75-second clock restarts.

The 75 second time limit helps shooters develop strategies to streamline and refine their shot processes. As shooters become comfortable with their shot processes, a simple way to increase the pressure is to simply decrease the time limit on each shot of the guts match. One technique we sometimes use is to shave five or 10 seconds off the time limit on each successive shot of the guts match. This employs the overload principle, causing the shooters to do more than they think they can, and really enhances the confidence level of shooters who find they can still perform under this level of stress.

We find other ways to ratchet up the pressure on shooters, causing them to discover ways to cope with that pressure and to remain calm and focused. I often encourage the eliminated shooters to lightly and mildly heckle those still on the line during their shots. Some really great methods I’ve seen shooters come up with are to stand as close as possible to the shooter without touching him or her, or to say that shooter’s name over and over as he or she fires the shot.

I have sometimes played really annoying tones and sound effects from my cell phone immediately behind the head of a shooter on the line. Shooters who fire guts matches under these types of conditions are better able to cope with potential distractions at real matches like inconsiderate shooters moving or packing up their gear while the line is still hot, or spectators joking and laughing near the ready area.

Left: Members of the Lion Rifles (L to R) Matt Teague, Tom Nguyen, James Vo, Zach Wilhite pose after a competition at the University of Memphis. Right: Matt Teague competes in a guts match at the University of Arkansas Fort Smith air rifle range.
few bouts of having teammates whisper bad knock-knock jokes in their ears, and shooters discover that wearing ear plugs, even for air rifle, really does enhance their powers of concentration, in addition to protecting their hearing.

The variations on the simple guts match are limited only by the imaginations of the coach or athletes. I frequently ask guts match shooters to take one honest hold on the target and reject it before shooting, all within the 75 second time limit. I do this for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to reinforce the idea that rejecting shots is acceptable, and not at all a failure. I sometimes start the 75 second interval with the shooters standing a few yards behind their position, so they must move forward, build their position and reestablish natural point of aim before firing the shot, all within the limited time.

A major upside of the guts match is the potential for a new shooter to score confidence-inspiring wins. All a rookie has to do is put together three or four quality shots, and he or she can beat more experienced competitors. By the same token, experienced shooters learn that their fundamentals and shot processes require constant focus and refinement if they wish to keep winning the guts matches. To assist both these outcomes, I sometimes allow rookie shooters, especially those with lower quality rifles one “instant ten” during a guts match. That means after the targets are scored, the designated shooter can proclaim any shot of his or hers to be a ten, regardless of the actual score. Again, I limit this to only one shot per guts match. It keeps rookies in the game one extra shot and makes higher-level shooters work harder to achieve victory.

A new variation we created this past season is the “zombie guts match,” because of all the recent focus and attention on zombies in movies, television shows and even government agencies like the CDC. We came up with this version because we had five strong shooters of similar ability, and wanted to increase the match pressure for them during practices. All the shooters keep an index card with their name written on it. If they are eliminated from the match, they give their card to me, and re-enter the match as a zombie. Zombies can be eliminated from the match only if they are the low score in a given round, and only if the winning shot is an inner ten. Eliminated zombies then stand behind remaining shooters and make zombie-growl “arrrgh” noises to increase the pressure.

Finally we also developed the solo-guts match as an individual training method to help shooters focus on individual performance goals. Shooters who aren’t on a team, or who find themselves with no buddies to shoot against can still compete in guts matches using the solo method. Each shooter determines what his or her performance goal is. Let’s say a shooter sets a performance goal of averaging 95 points in standing. Over a ten-shot string, a shooter averaging 95 points would likely shoot five tens and five nines, or maybe six tens, three nines, and one eight. However you break down the 95 be realistic in the point differentials.

While nine tens and a five is possible, it might not be probable. To compete against that score in a guts match format, the shooter would put 10 cards or pieces of paper with the appropriate scores written on them into a easily reachable container. To shoot the solo guts match, all the shooter does is fire a shot, and then draw a piece of paper from the container. On each draw, the shooter will win, lose, or tie the imaginary shooter who is shooting scores consistent with the performance goal.

Guts matches are simple, quick, and help create some sense of match pressure. They are easily adaptable depending on your team’s skill development and which part of the training program they have reached. Guts matches can even be fired by shooters training all alone. Helping shooters improve takes time, dedication and guts.

Ken Spiller competes in a guts match during training at the University of Arkansas Fort Smith air rifle range.